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# The Congress Party as the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of the Indian State?

Jona Aravind Dohrmann

Sons of Ind, why sit ye idle,  
Wait ye for some Deva's aid?  
Buckle to, be up and doing!  
Nations by themselves are made!  
(Sir Allan Octavian Hume, "Awake")<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

The introductory titular deliberation whether the Congress Party or Indian National Congress (INC) could be revered to as the Creator, Preserver and (potential) Destroyer of the Indian State shall hint at a possible viewpoint from which this party can be examined. Readers familiar with Indian religions and mythology may immediately identify the aforementioned characterisation of the INC as an allegory of the famous *Trimurti*.<sup>2</sup> Before delving into the role of the INC through the past decades it is worthwhile to highlight Sir Allan Octavian Hume, who is the author of the „awakening“ and rousing poem framing this article. His feats mark a seizable starting point from which the Congress Party set out in its quest to become India's most dazzling political party. Well aware of the fact that there is no dearth of writings on India's eldest party this article shall simply attempt to shed light on the Indian National Congress' impact on forming the Indian State. Thereby the term 'State' shall be understood the way the Indian Constitution designs the Indian Republic which is a

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<sup>1</sup> First stanza from poem by Sir A.O. Hume, taken from "The Old Man's Hope" (Calcutta, 1886), cited in: Mehrotra 2005, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> The *Trimurti* or triad represents all aspects of the Supreme Being. The *Trimurti* is depicted as a single-bodied, three-headed man. In the famous Elephanta Caves near Mumbai the Trimurti statue depicts the three aspects of Shiva as creator, preserver and destroyer.

union of its various states. Through the Constitution the Constituent Assembly wanted to establish India as a democracy with a strong centre as well as with a strong secular bias. In this concept the people within India were recognised as one Nation, thereby juxtaposing the Indian against the Pakistani concept of Hindus and Muslims being two different Nations. Therefore, for our purposes, any of the INC's impact on the structure of the Indian Union, secular set-up and/or democracy is seen as an action relevant for the situation of the Indian State.

Almost everything about the Indian National Congress is remarkable. One of the most striking features of the party in question is that it was founded by a member of the British Indian Civil Service – a Scotsman. This is probably the only instance in modern history in which a nationalist party in a colonial territory was organised and led for many years by a member of the ruling authority, which was the British Empire. But in a country where members of a Legislative Assembly (MLA) are flown out of the state by their own party men into another state belonging to the same party to avoid their being wooed to another party,<sup>3</sup> exceptional things can be expected. Now it seems the Indian National Congress has come full circle with an Italian-born person at the helm of party affairs. It is rather unusual for a party which claims to have been the main propellant in the struggle for independence to have been under the direct influence of foreigners or foreign born people, even having been established by one. In the following I would like to emphasise on a few aspects of the Indian National Congress which for a long time was seen as the state-supported and state-supporting party of India (Rothermund). This article looks at the Indian National Congress under the hypothesis that it can be seen as the Creator, the Preserver and also the potential Destroyer of the Indian State. The corroboration of the hypothesis is not as important as the widening of the reader's angle.

## 2 Founding of the Indian National Congress

As already drawn attention to, the Indian National Congress is the brainchild of a Civil Servant of the British Empire. Allan Octavian Hume was born in 1829. Already his father, Joseph Hume, had served in India and was the founder of the Radical Party in England. At the young age of 20 Allan Octavian Hume set foot on Indian soil in Calcutta (as it was till recently known, though today called Kolkata) as member of the Bengal Civil Service. As a politically alert person he must have absorbed every development in pre-Victorian governed India which eventually led to the administrative take-over of the reigns of India by the British Crown. Preceding the take-over was the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which made a strong impression on Hume. On one hand, he escaped death narrowly at the hands of rebels; on the other

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<sup>3</sup> Indian newspapers in the month of February have repeatedly reported that about a dozen of BJP MLAs from Goa have been taken to Rajasthan after the party leadership feared poaching by the INC ahead of a vote of confidence in the Goa Assembly, vide: "BJP herds its Goa MLAs to Lake City", *Sunday Times* of 20.02.2005, page 1.

hand, he had always disdained any kind of tumultuous upheaval. Throughout his later life Hume was haunted by the fragile construct of Imperial rule in South Asia. As Mehrotra put it, Hume feared yet another and more terrible revolt in India, so much so that he bent all his energy to safeguard against there being a repetition of the 1857 happenings and to ensure that Indians gained self-government without violence and bloodshed (Mehrotra 2005: 59). Mehrotra goes on to narrate that Hume, far from being embittered by India or Indians, regarded India not as his exile home but genuinely loved the country and its people with whom he easily made friends. After being a collector and commissioner of customs he was appointed in late 1870 by the then viceroy, Lord Mayo, as officiating Home Secretary in the imperial government of India. Later he was secretary in the Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce. Though being an able administrator he was seen by his fellow colleagues as eccentric and egoistical which later led to his downfall after his interceder, Lord Mayo, was succeeded by less lenient viceroys. On Viceroy Northbrook's arrival to India in 1872 Hume told him frankly in writing that the British were not loved in India and in no unclear words criticised the British Indian Government:

A studied and invariable disregard, if not actually contempt for the opinions and feelings of our subjects, is at the present day the leading characteristic of our government in every branch of the administration.<sup>4</sup>

After his suspension Hume was demoted to the post of a member of the board of revenue in Allahabad. Little did the Viceroyalty suspect that this was a blessing in disguise for the rise of the party that was to determine or co-determine India's fate for more than the next 100 years. His official career ruined when he was just 50, his demotion set him free to devote his time and energy to the cause of Indian nationalism. Coinciding was the emergence of theosophical thoughts in India. Therein Hume was most attracted by its principal tenet regarding the essential unity of all religions and the universal brotherhood of man (Mehrotra 2005: 63). His fortunes turned again when Lord Ripon, a rather indophil and socialist viceroy, took charge of India. The following was what he confided to a radical friend in early 1883:

[M]y view of the work which I am engaged in is that I am laying the foundation upon which hereafter be built a more complete system of self-government for India which may convert what is now a successful administration by foreigners into a real government of the country by itself. If in one or two generations, nay, even if in another century, we can accomplish the undertaking, and can render India self-governing upon just and equal principles, our work here will have been done.<sup>5</sup>

Hume, who had by then left his political isolation, served as an intermediary between the viceroy and the Indians to ascertain and organise Indian opinion in favour

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<sup>4</sup> Hume to Northbrook, 1 August 1872, Northbrook Papers, cited in: Mehrotra 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Ripon to Thomas Hughes, 9 January 1883, Ripon Papers, cited in: Mehrotra 2005.

of Ripon's liberal policies, which would allow Indians a larger share in local self-government. Ripon left India in December 1884. No other viceroy before or after Ripon was more dear to the natives as he was, and conversely no other viceroy was possibly so detestable to the Anglo-Indian community as Ripon. Long before M.K. Gandhi was called 'Mahatma', this honour went to Lord Ripon, who was also called by educated Indians 'Ripon the Righteous'. When he finally left India at the end of 1884 he was given a farewell which not even Lord Mountbatten was to receive (Mehrotra 2005: 66).

Until and during Ripon's tenure as viceroy the well-to-do segment of Indian society had developed considerably regarding (British-fashioned) education, mass transport and communication, increased urbanisation, augmenting (though limited) participation in local government and the creation of new professional classes. All this incited the growing will amongst educated Indians to strive for some sort of political participation in the formation of government opinion and policy. Ironically, attempts to bring about a common arena of political will formation failed, mainly for want of the right leadership. In this historical moment Hume provided the perfect leadership. Neither was he the first person in India to conceive of the idea of a pan-Indian political organisation nor was he a leader with any sizable Indian backing, but he had time to spend, accompanied with energy, contacts with and the support of Indian leaders as well as organisational skills. Thus he probably became the first person in modern colonial India to embark on a *yatra* or (political) pilgrimage long before the Gandhis and Advanis of more recent times used this means of political agitation. His enterprise was to 'link in':

I propose to make a little private tour – [...] – I propose to come to Poona [...] Then go on to Madras, Calcutta, Patna (perhaps Dacca), Benares, Allahabad, Agra, Delhi, Amritsar and Lahore – possibly also Lucknow and some other places. I want to make a practical effort towards that linking in which has now become a matter of vital importance to us.<sup>6</sup>

With the tacit support of the new Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, Hume invited those visited on his all-India journey to the first Indian National Congress in Bombay, held on 28 to 30 December 1885. The meeting was presided over by W.C. Bonnerjee from Calcutta. Interestingly most of the around 70 delegates did not know each other personally prior to the assembly. But Hume did. Contrary to his description of being egoistical, Hume never assumed the highest office within the Indian National Congress. Nevertheless, he dominated the INC for several years as a general secretary looking after the correspondence, the publicity, the organisation and the finances of the party. This occupation continued until 1901 when the first Indian, G.K. Gokhale, became a full-time worker of the Indian National Congress.

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<sup>6</sup> Hume to S.H. Chiplonkar, 16 November 1884, Chiplonkar Papers, cited in: Mehrotra 2005. Chiplonkar was then the secretary of the Pune-based Sarvajanic Sabha, which then was the leading political association in India.

Eventually the grand old party of the Indian subcontinent emerged from the diffuse political landscape of British-India into the limelight of political discourse. Hume experienced a mixed fate. In his role as an advocate for the Indian cause he was perhaps bound to come into conflict with the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, who very soon sensed that Hume was not simply meddling with the Indian National Congress to create a safety-valve to avert hostile challenge to the British *Raj* but was helping the INC to become a national party which intended to weld India into a state and to secure for it home rule or dominion status in about half a century (Mehrotra 2005: 71).

To pick up the thread from the beginning, viewing the INC as the progenitor of the Indian State, it will be interesting to keep in mind that the initiating impulse to liberate India with non-violent means through an ever growing political process was given by a member of the very country whose yoke would eventually be shaken off.

### 3 Creating India

Soon the INC was firmly established as a political organisation, which in the beginning only encompassed rather conservative dignitaries from the Indian society with a sprinkle of progressive British men, who from time to time even presided over the annual Congress meetings until as late as 1917. (Sonia Gandhi interestingly continued this tradition of foreign leaders in 1998 in being heaved to the party president's post.) Whereas after the inception of the INC its members were keen on extracting marginal (compared to the demand of home rule) concessions from the imperial government of India so as not to disturb the relationship with the viceroys, these moderates gradually came into conflict with more radical-minded members of the INC, which led to the party's first, but temporary split in 1907, later patched up in 1916 – the year after Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from his venture in South Africa. Although Mehra describes this schism period as fruitful for the crystallisation of a party system in India<sup>7</sup> – and there is no reason to doubt this – the schism also weakened the impetus of the party for some time and gave the English more breathing room. The old guard of the INC, which still had faith in this strategy of petitions and appeals towards the British rule, gradually became overwhelmed by the new brand of leaders, which supported more aggressive strategies for emphasising their demands. Unpopular measures such as those of the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, of dividing Bengal, further eroded the political stand of the moderates.

In the pre-independence period Mehra assigns three distinct stages to the INC's development (Mehra/Khanna/Kueck 2003: 63-64), which helps simplify this eventful period of Indian history. During the first stage, from 1885 to 1905, it remained an elitist debating society, petitioning the government for extra privileges for the few, which has been described as the 'politics of mendicancy' (Brass/Robinson 1987: 3).

<sup>7</sup> Ajay K. Mehra, "Historical Development of the Party Systems in India", in: Mehra/Khanna/Kueck 2003, p. 63.

The second stage (1905-1916) comprises the aforementioned crucial time of schism, in which the great debate between the moderates and the extremists over strategy led to an initial loss of the latter, but foreshadowed the later change that would pave the way for Mahatma Gandhi. The third and last pre-independence stage from 1916 to 1946 saw the INC taking shape as a mass movement. This period came to an end with the formation of an interim government. This was the time, too, when India was formed as a nation-state. After a certain stage of development it became obvious that British-India as a whole would cease to exist due to unbridgeable differences between especially the INC under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and others and the Muslim League under Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Here the paper does not delve too deeply into the intricacies of the separation or the whys of splitting as these subjects are still highly controversial and a subject of a host of publications.

In these formative years Mahatma Gandhi had already crossed the peak of his influence on daily politics, which were more and more becoming diplomatic back-room discussions between the concerned parties to it. By 1942, at the summit of the 'Quit India' movement, control passed on to the young socialists. Many a Congressman deplored the fact that Mahatma Gandhi was not listened to in this crucial period of power transition.<sup>8</sup> The INC high command around Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel became weary of the decades of fighting the British *Raj* and of spending weeks, months and years in prisons. They wanted to harvest the fruits of their long toiling for India's independence. Furthermore they had tasted their share of power under the Government of India Act, 1935, and were now eager to use their skills in Free India. Contrary to a much aired belief within India, Mahatma Gandhi was probably the only fairly influential authority to oppose the 'vivisection' of British-India when it came to decision-making in the viceregal chambers. This should not imply that the INC as a whole was not committed to a united India – this was what they had been fighting for for the previous decades – but the élan and possibly the resilience to counter the strong claim for a separate state of Pakistan had evaded the Congress leadership.

Nevertheless, preceding the actual split there were several last-minute attempts to save British-India's unity. The conservative British government under Sir Winston Churchill attempted one last time to solve the constitutional deadlock in India in June 1945 during the Shimla conference. According to the Wavell Plan the

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<sup>8</sup> Jha 2004, pp. 97-107. According to Jha, who had grown up in one of the ashrams near Calcutta which served as Gandhi's headquarters during his visits to Assam and Bengal, the Congress leadership together with the British Government along with Jinnah was guilty of allowing India to be partitioned. Jha especially reproaches Nehru and Patel for letting Jinnah have his way. About Gandhi, he quotes Gandhi's secretary, Pyarelal, that he was not ready to contain Nehru and Patel as they knew his point of view. Gandhi could not resort to non-cooperation with his colleagues because their judgement differed from his own and was not willing to 'threaten his colleagues with sabotage [...] because they felt unable to go his way.' (p. 105).



Executive Council should have been provided with an equal number of seats for Hindus and Muslims, though Hindus even before partition constituted approximately 70 per cent of British-India's population. In order to achieve independence at the earliest possible, the INC agreed to this *modus operandi*. But the leader of the Muslim League, Jinnah, opposed this suggestion and contested the INC's claim to represent all Indians – i.e., also the Muslims – as he suspected the INC of trying to disunite the Muslim League. The INC even wanted to nominate Muslim candidates for their quota in the Executive Council, which must have been a clear affront against Jinnah. Thus the INC once again demonstrated towards the British and also towards the Muslim League that it did not at all subscribe to the 'Two-Nation-Theory' promulgated by Jinnah and the Muslim League. According to the theory's contention Muslims and Hindus form two separate nations who need to be accommodated in different states. In the end the Shimla Conference ended without any result. Anyway, this conference was ill-fated in its inception as parliamentary elections were about to be held in England in which the conservative government wanted to score on successes in foreign affairs, namely the Indian question (Dohrmann 2002: 25).

The electoral victory of the Labour Party, which bestowed them an absolute majority, constituted a turning point in this deadlock. In March 1946 England's new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, recognised the right of self-determination for Indians. But the Labour government missed the opportunity to set the pace pro-actively from a commanding position (Rothermund 1993: 17). They failed to outline concrete steps towards India's independence in any government policy statement and thus stumbled into the vortex of rivalry infighting between the INC and the Muslim League. After elections had also taken place in the Indian provinces the Labour government assigned the so called Cabinet Mission– consisting of cabinet ministers – with solving the conflicts within India. In a three partite conference (INC, Muslim League, British Government) again in the hill station of Shimla the Cabinet Mission moved a plan (Cabinet Mission Plan), according to which a federal state with a weak central government was suggested. Every province was called upon to depute its representatives into a Constituent Assembly. In these provinces the electorate was to be divided into 'general', Muslim and Sikh voters. Geographically three sections were drawn up, which constituted more or less today's Pakistan including Punjab, today's India without the eastern provinces and today's Bangladesh. A sovereign Pakistan was rejected by the Cabinet Mission. They tried to demolish Jinnah's idea of partition by threatening him with the offer of a Pakistan minus those districts of Punjab, Assam and Bengal with a pre-dominantly Muslim population. The Cabinet Mission, therefore, in spite of strong objections from the INC and the Muslim League, went ahead to recommend certain complicated and purposely vague proposals of their own. These tempted the League to secure a bigger Pakistan, provided they were willing to work for some time the constitution of an 'Indian Union'. At the same time it enticed the INC of preserving at least a semblance of Indian unity, provided it was willing to run the risk of India being divided not only into two but



three or more parts in future, should the dissenting Provinces opt out of the Union (Mehrotra 2005: 278).

In June 1946 the quarrelling parties rather reluctantly agreed at first to accept the plan. No agreements were achieved concerning the crucial question in how far a region could opt out of a once allotted section or change to another section or whether it at all had to be part of any section (Chandra 1998: 492). Not unnaturally, both the INC and the Muslim League interpreted the plan as favourable to them. Jinnah never within himself compromised the idea of having a sovereign Pakistan. In the provincial election which had taken place prior to the arrival of the Cabinet Mission the INC had won a clear majority (91.3 per cent) in the non-Muslim constituencies. But also the Muslim League performed well in the separate electorates where it won 86.6 per cent. This boosted Jinnah's position who in earlier elections had to accept severe drawbacks. This should have been an eye-opener to the INC, revealing that by now Jinnah had managed to get hold of the Muslim vote and that he would probably not let this development in his favour go without drawing benefit from it. Presumably in a mood of exuberant enthusiasm after the electoral victory, Jawaharlal Nehru in July 1946 made a politically imprudent and even disastrous remark in front of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). He said that the proposed Constituent Assembly would be sovereign and not bound to recommendations of the Cabinet Mission, especially relating to geographical delineations of the Indian map or its sections (Chandra 1998: 493; Rothermund 1993: 19). The Muslim League immediately sensed the danger of being run over by a Congress majority. The Constituent Assembly and an interim government – as proposed by the Cabinet Mission – were implemented. The League at first stayed away from both and Jinnah rescinded his approval of the Cabinet Mission Plan and furthermore did not try his luck in the establishment of a Constituent Assembly but rather resorted to violence. The Muslim League which felt its back against the wall developed plans for what was to be known as the 'Direct Action Day' (16 August 1946), on which communal clashes would be provoked. The following atrocities committed by Muslim groups were retaliated by Hindu mobs in no way less brutally. Calcutta underwent riots leading to blood baths in which more than 5,000 people on both sides fell victim.

Later, realising the risks of continued abstinence, the League entered the Interim Government and tried to paralyse it. Effective work was not possible. The Constituent Assembly which was eventually summoned on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1946 was constituted by representatives from the Provincial Legislatures. The Muslim League's boycott lasted till the separation of India. Meanwhile, in the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, pressure from the Muslim League and communal passions bursting out into spasmodic rioting, the British Administration was forced to accept a separate Pakistan and eventually conceded independence to two sovereign states (Dohrmann 2002: 26).

On 20<sup>th</sup> February 1947 the British prime minister, Clement Attlee, had announced His Majesty's 'definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transfer of power into responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June 1948'

and clearly hinted at the possibility of partition. Attlee's announcement was welcomed by the Congress Working Committee in a resolution on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1947, thus implicitly recognising and acquiescing to the necessity of partition. In April 1947 Nehru publicly stated that 'the Muslim League can have Pakistan if they want but on the condition that they do not take away other parts of India which do not wish to join Pakistan' (Mehrotra 2005: 279), thus practically sealing India's fate as a separate entity from Pakistan. As mentioned before, in choosing partition of India, Congress leaders chose the lesser evil (Mehrotra 2005: 281). With hindsight, the Congress leaders would probably have delayed the partition process. Unbeknownst to them was the fact that Jinnah due to health reasons had only a short life-span left to enjoy the independence of Pakistan which he had wrested out of the Congress leaders' hands. But in 1947, though partition was an undesirable solution, the alternatives which were lurking were worse: continued slavery, civil war, chaos, and the danger of disintegrating India into several states. On the other hand, to many Congress leaders partition was not altogether an evil, as India was at long last free. No more imprisonments, or arduous campaigning to garner support for independence, or infighting with the Muslim League and no more colonial task master at whose mercy the people of India had been for the longest time. The INC managed to maintain the unity of two-thirds of India and they had not compromised their ideals of secularism, democracy and a common Indian nationality. Nehru was then able to implant into India a strong parliamentary democracy further accentuating one of the State's strongest bases. In choosing the rather political and state-forming post of a Prime Minister Nehru paved the way for a Westminsterian democracy. Jinnah preferred – probably due to his illness – the more representative and apolitical post of Governor of Pakistan. Nehru was able to imprint his strongly democratic, secular and pluralistic views into the fabric of Indian politics. Jinnah, who basically also was a man of secular views and had even advised the Indian Muslims to become faithful citizens of India, had no time left to develop Pakistan as a democratic state. The only consolation for partition may have been that the freedom fighters could think that the lodestars of their fight for independence would in fact find more resonance in a more homogenous India than they would have found in a country where particular strong minority interests would have had to be accommodated. In a rather naïve vein some Congress leaders, like Maulana Azad, thought partition to be transitory:

The division is only on the map of the country and not in the hearts of the people, and I am sure it is going to be a short-lived partition (Mehrotra 2005: 281).

Seeing the present development in Indo-Pakistani peace talks and more so in the 'cricket diplomacy' with the spectators hailing each other's teams, one could well agree with Azad that the division of the once united people may only be political. But the latter part of his statement was probably already at the time of utterance a wishful thinking.

## 4 Preserving India

Writing about ‘creating, preserving’ and later on ‘destroying’ India is not necessarily intended to be understood literally. Literal meaning may be more strongly attributed to the Creation of India as a nation-state with a set of people in certain boundaries with a common citizenship adhering to common rules set forth in the Indian Constitution. It need not be mentioned that the INC not only helped in creating the Indian State but also the idea of India. This encompassed the ambitious project of accommodating a multitudinous people within one State. Multitudinous in the sense of ethnicity, language, culture, regional discrepancy and religion. There are probably not many modern states that have succeeded in preserving a relatively fragile, inhomogeneous body politic. Former states like Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Ethiopia (including the seceding Eritrea) were not able to maintain unity and disintegrated more or less violently, even without being not nearly as diverse as India was in the past or is even today. Positive examples, positive in the sense of preserving a rather peaceful union, are Canada and China. In between, but hardly comparable, is Iraq, which appears to be held together by an American bracket.

It is not unusual that attaining a goal is easier than preserving it. India, under the leadership of the INC, had achieved independence. But was India fit for and ready to accept independence? Would it be strong enough to maintain the unity of this vast country which never before had been assembled in a similar way? India’s moral authority, Mahatma Gandhi, had not seldom reminded his compatriots that Indians had to be mature to deserve freedom. Here he interestingly concurred with Hume, who much earlier than Gandhi had admonished his Indian friends. Gandhi never hesitated to call off civil resistance and mass non-cooperation when he had the impression that the agitation was becoming violent and barbarian – thus unbecoming of an independent people. According to comments by Gandhi during the last stance of the fight for independence, which was more of a struggle for unity or to secure as big a chunk as possible of British-India, India should be left to itself to fend for its future. Even at the cost of violent outbursts. This indicates that he thought India to be mature for independence. No matter what the Mahatma thought, the ruling INC under the leadership of Nehru after attaining independence had to consolidate whatever was left to them of British-India. Viewing the situation as an outsider, it would have been tempting at that instance to set up India as a ‘Hindu rashtra’ or the Hindu counterpart state to Pakistan, as Hindus constituted the vast majority of the Indian population. But astonishingly, this highly human reflex was not followed.

Many see at least one reason in Hinduism itself. In this belief, ‘God’ or the Higher Being is nameless, formless and bare of personality or quality. The umpteen names given to the Gods and Goddesses nevertheless are merely labels given by imperfect human beings, who seek salvation and chose the deity befitting them best. The chosen deity doctrine (= *ishta-devata*) was at first attributed to *dharma* (as Hinduism is widely called in India) and their deities but was not logically confined therein. Thus a tolerant tenor was immanent in Hinduism. Furthermore, Hinduism is

basically not missionary in its outlook, has no institutional organisations such as the church for Christian denominations and thus had not had any political say. For the realisation of its philosophical and spiritual values, Hinduism does not require a state or a certain kind of state. All these ‘failures’ of Hinduism were conducive for the future success of the secular state in India.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning democracy, the other basic element of the Indian State, the American sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, contends that Hinduism is a significant factor for the continued existence of democracy in India – in spite of a host of adverse indicators. Lipset mentions *inter alia* religion being a positive factor in this issue. It is not a pre-requisite of the Hindu fold of religions pre-dominantly prevailing in India, to interfere in or meddle with daily politics (contrary to other religions). Thus, the separation of state and religion functions comparatively well in India.<sup>10</sup> Another influencing factor, according to Lipset, is India’s past as a British colony. In contradistinction to other colonial rulers, Great Britain always tended to involve indigeneous people into local governments. As a result, countries earlier ruled by the English were not suddenly precipitated into a hitherto unknown self-governance and a new type of governance called ‘democracy’. These nations had had some amount of practice in the art of rallying for votes and shouldering responsibility. But these were obviously not all the ingredients of being able to preserve the Indian State. Nehru and Gandhi, the leading figures in the struggle for independence, as well as many other intellectual Indians, had studied in the United Kingdom. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the formidable leader of the untouchables, who was later to be called ‘Father of the Indian Constitution’, had acquired his law degree from the United States. These eminent figures led India to freedom. It must here be noted that Dr. Ambedkar cannot exactly be called a freedom fighter, as he was pre-occupied with his own struggle in favour of the untouchables. Neither was he member of the INC. He was a founder of three parties, of which just the Republican Party of India (RPI) has survived the stormy decades of India’s younger history. But it is possibly Nehru’s greatest merit that he through his studies and his upbringing was groomed towards the Westminster type of democracy with a strong Prime Minister determining the fate of government policies. He had also witnessed too many atrocities in the name of religion to opt for any other model than a secular state. Nehru was probably the ideal person to lead the government in this situation concerning INC’s core values such as democracy and secularism. He was – different than Mahatma Gandhi – not inclined towards any religion. Knowing religion to be a sensitive item in India, he always stressed that there should be amicable co-existence between religion and a

<sup>9</sup> Smith 1963, p. 29; Dohrmann 2002, pp. 164-165. I am here not going into the intricacies of the term ‘Hinduism’ which is not exactly correct in respect of talking of a religion.

<sup>10</sup> Lipset quoted in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 14 July 1999, “Politischer Königsweg”, p. N6; Smith 1963, p. 26: “Hinduism’s concern with political institutions and the course of human history is thus a secondary concern at most.”

secular notion of the State.<sup>11</sup> Nehru expected the new institutions of the Indian State, such as the Parliament, the Supreme Court, the democratic set-up of the State as well as the unbiased approach in terms of religion towards the citizen of India, would have an integrating effect on the nation. These now Indian-governed institutions were to be accompanied by modern technology, heavy industries, dams and power plants as the 'new temples' of India. According to Nehru all these were to be the institutions in which the modern Indian citizen would learn to become a democratic and secular member of India. The resulting impact of the desired learning effect was in Nehru's eyes discernible as a preserving factor of the Indian State.

The INC had also set out to bring about an egalitarian society as democracy cannot be thought of without equality. The means were to be positive discrimination and abolishment of untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi and with him the INC had nevertheless always put down the claims of the leaders of the depressed classes, of which the foremost leader was Ambedkar, for separate electorates. The INC preferred reserved seats for the untouchables. It went so far that Gandhi went on an indefinite fast to counter Ambedkar's move to wrest separate electorates from the English during the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1932. The resulting regulations on the status of communities in the forthcoming Constitution (Government of India Act, 1935), entitled the Communal Award, was announced in August 1932. The difference between the separate electorate and the reserved seats system was important. In the reserved seats system, the candidate could only be an untouchable in a certain number of constituencies, but they were never in a majority in any one constituency. This meant that though only an untouchable could be elected, higher castes could project their own chosen untouchable candidate, for whom the local untouchables themselves would not have voted, and vote him in due to their majority in this particular constituency. On the contrary, in the separate electorates system only untouchables could cast their vote for untouchable candidates. According to Christophe Jaffrelot, the latter system would have endowed untouchables with their own chosen representatives,

thereby constituting themselves into a real political force, whereas the reserved seats left open the possibility of upper caste-dominated parties co-opting untouchables,

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<sup>11</sup> Nehru called himself an agnostic. Writes Nehru in his autobiography: "Hinduism's concern with political institutions and the course of human history is thus a secondary concern at the most. The spectacle of what is called religion, or at any rate organised religion, in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror and I have frequently condemned it and wished to make a clean sweep of it. Almost always it seems to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation, and the preservation of vested interests. And yet I knew well that there was something else in it, something which supplied a deep inner craving of human beings. How else could it have been the tremendous power it has been and brought peace and comfort to innumerable tortured souls?" (*An Autobiography*, p. 374, Oxford University Press, New Delhi Reprint 1980).

handing out tickets during elections and electing them, even when this ran contrary to the wishes of local untouchables (Jaffrelot 2005: 54).

However, separate electorates were not to be, as Ambedkar would not risk being the cause of Gandhi's death or moreover the cause for Gandhi's committing suicide for his political view. Yet, Ambedkar was the only Indian politician whom Gandhi contested by resorting to a fast.<sup>12</sup> In the then negotiated 'Poona Pact' – thus titled as Gandhi at this time was in Yeravda Jail in Poona – a system of reserved seats was introduced, in which 148 seats (instead of the 71 put forward in the Communal Award) were granted to untouchables in the Legislative Council.

This recourse to history was taken to show that the tussle over the way an egalitarian society should be ushered in was fought much before India gained independence in this certainly painful experience for Ambedkar who for a long time remained in the wilderness concerning historical writing.

This episode shows another of the preserving factors the INC was sporting: the ability to accommodate very diverse streams of thoughts in spite of severe rifts. Barring the Muslim League, (in pre-independence India) the INC for a long time was the only serious contender for government responsibility in the centre as well as in the states. In its long history it experienced many splits and rejoinders. The 1907-1916 schism has already been mentioned. As late as 1945 one group within the INC, the Congress Socialist Party, felt compelled to leave the INC. This group was more inclined towards socialist ideals which could not be fulfilled by the mainstream and catch-all-approach of the INC. The INC, also called the 'umbrella party', in the very beginning even housed the right wing Hindu Mahasabha and bore the seed from which its fiercest opponent, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), would one day emerge. Supporters of the Hindu Mahasabha, the precursor of the right wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), were followers of the INC and even their presidents. Not surprisingly, the annual sessions of the Hindu Mahasabha were held at the same time and place as the INC. However, the Mahasabha created a conservative, if not communal, bastion within the INC, which eventually led to their separation from the INC in 1928. One of the prominent Congress leaders, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, who also was a member of the Hindu Mahasabha, later split from Nehru in protest against his lenient attitude towards Pakistan and founded the BJS (= Bharatiya Jan Sangh), which after 1980 became the BJP (Mehra/Khanna/Kueck 2003: 77).

The rather tolerant attitude of the INC in accommodating differentiating, if not contradicting political opinions, was reflected in the very first elected Union Government of 1950. It included not only people from outside the INC and other political parties, but even members of opposition parties like the aforementioned Ambedkar of the RPI and Mookerjee of the BJS. This political magnanimity was of course

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<sup>12</sup> Jaffrelot 2005, p. 65: Gandhi 'gambled' on Ambedkar's self-restraint precisely because he knew that he would not respond by resorting to violence.

nurtured by the fact that the INC had an overwhelming majority in the Indian Parliament, which is the *Lok Sabha*, and was unchallenged by any other party (Thakurta/Raghuraman 2004: 136). The INC was so dominant in the Indian political landscape that it prompted the eminent scholar, Rajni Kothari, to describe the Indian party system

as a system of *one party dominance* (which, it may be noted, is very different from what is generally known as a one party system). It is a competitive party system but one in which the competing parts play rather dissimilar roles. It consists of a *party of consensus and parties of pressure*. The latter function on the margin [...]. Inside the margin are various factions within the party of consensus. Outside the margin are several opposition groups and parties, dissident groups from the ruling party [...]. These groups outside the margin do not constitute alternatives to the ruling party.<sup>13</sup>

If one looks at the elections results from 1952 to 1962, one can well imagine the near total dominance of the INC.

**Table 1: Lok Sabha elections and popular votes and seats won by the INC**

Election year	Seats (total)	Seats won (absolute)	Seats won (%)	Popular vote (%)
1952	489	364	74.4	45.0
1957	494	371	75.1	47.8
1962	494	361	73.1	44.7
1967	520	283	54.4	40.8
1971	518	352	68.0	43.7
1977	542	154	28.4	34.5
1980	529	353	66.7	42.7
1984	542	415	76.6	48.1
1989	529	197	37.2	39.5
1991	534	227	42.5	36.5
1996	543	140	25.8	28.8
1998	539	141	26.2	25.9
1999	543	114	21.0	28.3
2004	545	145	26.6	26.2

When Kothari was writing his article in 1964, the INC was for the third consecutive election enjoying a near three-quarter majority in the Indian Parliament (*Lok Sabha*) whilst only having a yield in popular vote of below 50 per cent. The large discrepancy in popular vote translating into many more seats can be explained through the Indian electoral system. Its first-past-the-post system allows the candidate to be elected who enjoys the support of the relative majority of voters. All the other votes are not counted. Therefore at the outset of India's democratic history the INC for a

<sup>13</sup> Rajni Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India" (article dates from 1964), in: Zoya Hasan 2004, pp. 40-41.



long time benefited from the opposition votes being split due to infighting, thus allowing the Congress candidate to emerge victorious. The 'one party dominance' of the INC certainly was beneficial in preserving the young State's unity and integrity. There was no great fighting between the ruling 'party of consensus' (with its catch-all attitude) and the marginalised opposition parties. Nehru and his government were therefore able to concentrate on ambitious projects such as modernising at least the Hindu society, especially concerning their marriage and succession laws. However, in this quest, Nehru had to overcome strong, conservative inner-party opposition led by the other Congress stalwart and Minister for Home Affairs, Vallabhbhai Patel. Patel's death in 1950 eased Nehru's work. Nehru was rather afraid of changing the Muslim *status quo*, lest they feel as a foreign people in a Hindu dominated State.

Concerning INC's task to preserve the Indian State, there were at the same time challenges from within and without. Just to name some, it may be recalled that the arch rivalry with Pakistan began with the first Kashmir conflict which led to the till today highly controversial accession of Kashmir to the Indian Union soon after the partition of British-India on 15 August 1947. Rulers of the Princely States, such as Kashmir, had been encouraged to accede to either Dominion – India or Pakistan, taking into account factors such as geographical contiguity and the wishes of their people. The Maharaja of Kashmir delayed his decision in an effort to remain independent. But then an internal revolt precipitated events in Kashmir. The uproar against an oppressive taxation sparked off cross border movements between Kashmir and Pakistan. Being a Muslim majority state and contiguous to Pakistan, Kashmir was expected to accede to Pakistan; since the Hindu Ruler acceded instead to India, a dispute arose in the case of Kashmir.<sup>14</sup> The outcome of the ensuing imbroglio is very well known. Recently politicians are again trying to mend this mishap of attaining independence, with General-turned-President Musharraf and the Indian Prime Minister attempting to at least arrive at confidence building measures, not to speak of solving the problem.

On home turf, even intra-Indian borders, namely those of the former English Presidencies with their old administrative boundaries, had to be redrawn along linguistic lines. But even these administrative measures had been foreshadowed by Gandhi's recognition of Provincial Congress Committees (PCC) along linguistic lines, such as the Andhra PCC, Tamil Nadu PCC and the Karnataka PCC. The corresponding areas had, until the revamping of the states had taken place, been part of the giant Madras Presidency. Another area to be revisited was the Bombay Presidency. Reorganising of States brought the INC, in fact, under pressure of the parties and groups at the margin as Nehru and the INC would not concede subdivisions easily. It took one of the Andhra leaders to fast unto death and one militant regional party to threaten Nehru to dislodge the INC in today's Maharashtra until statehood was granted. These grants were all preserving acts concerning the unity of India.

<sup>14</sup> For more details: Jakob Rösel, "Die Entstehung des Kaschmirkonflikts", in: Draguhn 1999; Bazaz 1954, pp. 325-327.

Both Andhra Pradesh as well as Maharashtra have been strongholds of the INC. This is not particularly true anymore today. As the German historians Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund point out, in those days, ‘whenever the Congress came to terms with the federal plurality of India, it gained added strength rather than any loosening of its hold’ (Kulke/Rothermund 1999: 302).

Soon after Nehru’s demise the decline of the INC began. Not quickly and not even immediately visible for the outsider. Indira Gandhi, Nehru’s daughter, inducted to the helm of affairs as a compromise candidate by the Congress High Command, could for some time keep up the image of an invincible INC as the party of consensus. As can be seen from table 1, ever since the 1967 elections there has been steady downward movement in Congress’ fortunes with sporadic highs and lows, but with the downhill direction prevailing. Whereas in the early stages of post-independence the INC was commanding a thumping three-quarter majority, this has been reduced by and by to around one quarter, which mirrors its popular vote support.

Today it is argued, that coalitions are inevitably to stay in India given its diversity and the electoral system of voting. One may rightly ask why, in the early phase of India’s independence, there were such clear majorities for the Congress. One answer runs thus:

Congress was inseparably linked with the independence struggle and consequently its candidates continued to win not only at the centre but also in the states. But once the aura of the independence struggle began to fade and new challenges and new aspirations began to surface, the people found other parties and leaders to voice their concerns and aspirations and in whom to repose their trust.<sup>15</sup>

This contention finds support in the following chart which shows the popular votes for the INC and other national parties declining. This reveals that not only support for the INC was dwindling but for other national parties as well.

**Table 2: Popular vote for the INC and national parties**

Election year	1971	1977	1991	1996	1998	1999
Popular vote for INC	43.7	34.5	36.5	28.8	25.9	28.3
Popular vote for national parties	77	85	81	69	68	67

Source: Zoya Hasan; E. Shridaran; R. Sudarshan, *India’s Living Constitution*, permanent black, New Delhi 2004, p. 144.

The INC along with the other national parties started losing support, so much so that more and more powerful regional parties on the fringes became the king-makers in the centre. Whilst the INC was until recently opposed to coalitions in the centre they have even adapted to this fairly new feature of Indian party politics. It was not easy

<sup>15</sup> Ravi P. Bhatia, “Consequences of Electoral Systems on Coalition Governments”, in: Singh/Mishra 2004, p. 269.

for the party who thinks itself as being the natural party of governance. Speeches of Sonia Gandhi illustrate that until as late as September 1998 the INC leadership thought – as though not having participated in the past 10 years of party politics – that

this [the coalitional phase] is a passing phase and we will come back again with full force and on our steam. [...] In the last few months, I get the feeling that the country, fed up with over two years of non-governance, is waiting to give us another chance.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after, Vajpayee's government fell due to the withdrawal of the support of one of its allies, the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam) and its leader Jayalalithaa. The INC also had its hand in this tactical move. But it miscalculated upon its own power status, as one of its regional leaders, the Congress strongman from Maharashtra, Sharad Pawar, together with like-minded politicians, broke away from the INC, forming the NCP (National Congress Party) because they had apprehensions about Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin. Gandhi dramatically submitted her resignation from the post of party president. What followed was a high drama, Congress being at its best, of sycophancy and farcical shows of loyalty, resulting in Gandhi's reinstatement as Congress President.

Even this blow did not immediately prompt reconsiderations on the INC's policies towards other parties. It took the now former 'party of consensus' another five years to realise openly, that coalition politics were to stay in India, not just as an aberration of Indian politics, but as one of its salient features – at least in the foreseeable future. In its Shimla conclave in June 2003 the INC finally came to terms with the ground realities of its electoral prospects, seeing their support shrinking in key states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. The INC now seemed to understand that their weakness in these populous states would not be transitory and that they would have to tie up with other parties, whom they had earlier just regarded as the 'margin', at best able to exert limited pressure. Unexpected by almost everyone, in May 2004 the tables turned again in favour of India's grand old party. It was not a landslide victory though, as many Indians like to name it when an unforeseen change of government occurs. As can be seen from table 1, the INC, though losing in its popular vote share by another 2.1 per cent, still managed to raise its seat tally to 145 (as against 114 in the previous election of 1999).

Despite the fact that the INC once again became the single largest party in the *Lok Sabha*, and having tied with several other smaller parties, this coalition, going by the name 'United Progressive Alliance', was not able to win a majority. It is dependent on the 'outside' support of the two Communist Parties of India. Termed as fragile, this novelty – for INC-conditions – has completed its first year of governance. The electorate had by and large repudiated the 'Shining India'-campaign of the NDA-government (National Democratic Alliance) which was also marred by com-

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<sup>16</sup> Sonia Gandhi during the 'brainstorming session' of the INC in Pachmarhi in September 1998 quoted in: Thakurta/Raghuraman 2004, p. 161.

munal outbursts and even state endorsed pogroms in Gujarat. Lastly, the issue of Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin did not spark protest of the voters.<sup>17</sup> As leader of the triumphing party she was destined to become India's next Prime Minister. After the elections were won, the Congress Parliamentary Party elected her as their leader. But soon thereafter she sprang a surprise on friends and foes alike by renouncing her claim to be Prime Minister and recommending the senior Congress leader Dr. Manmohan Singh for this post. Whatever her ulterior motives may have been, this was the wisest move she could contemplate as this took all the steam out of the campaign directed against her.

Whatever is to be said of the INC, it has accepted the rules of democracy (except for the comparatively brief period of Emergency in the mid-1970s), thus adding another preserving factor to the Indian State. It has never – not even actually during the Emergency – tried to eliminate political competitors.<sup>18</sup> It would probably have had ample opportunity to do so, completely ruling India in the centre as well as on the state level. But democratic culture, which for a long time had been the 'umbrella'-quality of the INC within its own fold, later was applied to the parties outside its setup. And these parties have reciprocated this mind-set. The democratic quarrel may not always have been executed in a cultured manner, but it was nevertheless democratic. Thus, till today Nehru's ideas of fair play in politics and more particularly in democracy are prevailing. How strong the other preserving factor concerning the Indian State still is, namely the Indian or Nehruvian concept of secularism, remains to be seen. As the other parties also largely adhere to the democratic forms of opinion-formation, it cannot be seen as a big surprise – as some western commentators do – that political power in India passes from one hand into the other relatively smoothly. Charges of election fraud on a big scale are also seldom or never heard of in India. Despite all shortcomings the INC can be regarded as Preserver of the Indian State as under the rule of this party a viable democratic State was established with supporting salient features such as the secular outlook of the State. Furthermore, under Nehru's and his successor's leadership the INC managed to ward off external and internal challenges in order to preserve the State. Given the limited space of this article, these are merely some factors which may be seen as having had preserving tendencies concerning the Indian State/Union or the Unity of India.

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<sup>17</sup> See a very interesting write-up on this issue by Uwe Skoda, "Wahlverwandtschaften - Zur Verbindung von Politik und Verwandtschaft im indischen Wahlkampf", in: *Südasiens-Informationen*, Nr. 6, July 2004.

<sup>18</sup> This contention is ironically not true for the inner-party democracy of the INC, where it often willingly submitted itself to the dynastic rule by the Nehru-Gandhi clan ever since Indira Gandhi acquired unquestioned control over the party by splitting it in 1969. For further elaboration *vide*: Thakurta/Raguraman 2004, pp. 143-149.

## 5 Destroying India?

Nevertheless, the INC cannot be spared concerning the discussion of more destructive attitudes taken up by the party. As was said before, the INC projected itself as the guardian of secular interests, thus maintaining one of the main pillars of the Indian State as promulgated by the Constitution. The secular heritage was derived from the period of the independence struggle. Still, political opponents often branded the INC 'pseudo-secular', which though being a tendentious allegation, is not altogether to be done away with. Often, when it seemed opportune, the INC resorted to 'playing the Hindu Card'. This basically means that the INC was trying to avoid the impression that it was pampering Muslims and thereby abandoning the Hindu majority's interests. Right from Nehru's times onwards, secularism was not on the agenda of every Congressman. This prompted Nehru to remark in his autobiography, that „many a Congressman was a communalist under his nationalist cloak.“ Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish pioneer of developmental policies, even saw communalist roots in the INC in the frequent usage of Hinduistic symbols and idioms by Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>19</sup> This perhaps explains why the Muslim League was estranged from very early on.

Compromising the inner fabric of the Indian Union was quite often done when the INC felt its power being weaned away by other parties who were conquering the political space, which for a long time had been unquestionably occupied by the Congress.<sup>20</sup> The Gujarat riots, which cost the Muslim population of Gujarat dearly, are still fresh in memory. The Sangh Parivar, or group of right-wing organisations and parties, had sparked off a pogrom against the minority to avenge an ostensible assault of Muslims on Hindu activists (*kar sevaks*) who were returning from Ayodhya in the now infamous town of Godhra, where 58 people died in a burning train car of the Sabarmati Express.<sup>21</sup> In the aftermath of this tragedy, which hit the state just a year after the epic earthquake of 2001, the INC tried to regain power. But rather than confronting BJP's aggressive Hindutva policies (promoting Hinduism as the way of life for Indian) head-on, the events in Gujarat revealed how devoid the INC was of having a coherent strategy in its attempts to counter the Sangh Parivar. The INC gambled on accepting one of the former BJP Chief Ministers, Shankersinh Vaghela, into their ranks, not as a mere party member but as the Gujarat Congress Chief. Vaghela had been a RSS activist for the better half of his political career, but had quit the BJP on grounds of factional infighting. First, he formed his own party

<sup>19</sup> Myrdal 1968, p. 236, where he further elaborates that 'despite its broadminded leaders and secularist resolutions, the Congress was basically Hindu in outlook.' He contends that the more successful the INC became, the more it transformed into a Hindu party in the eyes of many Muslims, so that 'it was thus Gandhi more than anyone else who helped transform Jinnah from a keen Indian nationalist into the architect of Pakistan'.

<sup>20</sup> For more details see Dohrmann 2002, pp. 177-183.

<sup>21</sup> For details, see Zakaria 2002.

(Rashtriya Janata Party), but after it did not fare well in the elections it merged with the INC.

The upcoming elections in December 2002 were widely seen as a battle between Narendra Modi's sectarian Hindutva and secularism. Instead of castigating the state-endorsed pogroms against Muslims, individuals and organisations close to Vaghela attacked the Modi government for not having done enough to completely eliminate cow slaughter in the state, while slaughtering human beings was anathema. Not unjustly, the INC for utilising this strategy was seen as furthering a 'soft Hindutva', so as not to lose out on the successful campaigning of the BJP in the state. INC's opportunism was so obvious that even Modi was able to cheer up the crowds attending his speeches by remarking,

that the people of Gujarat were known for their willingness to pay a couple of Rupees more to buy 'the real thing' rather than settle for an imitation product. 'Don't buy copycat products', he exhorted the crowds, drawing appreciative chuckles and applause (Thakurta/Raghuraman 2004: 170).

The INC was punished with an annihilating election result. The BJP romped home with a staggering two-thirds majority. This too, in the home state of the Mahatma. Probably the devastating results for the INC did not occur on account of the, in fact, severely communally polarised society but due to the adoption of a faulty campaign strategy to woo the electorate of Gujarat. This may, to some extent, be verified by the *Lok Sabha* elections of 2004 when the INC managed to garner 12 of the 26 assembly seats by returning to old values, thus reducing the gap between the BJP and itself. It may be remarked that the INC would probably make some headway if it adopted a clear-cut secular strategy, as BJP's Gujarat unit is a seriously divided body. Recently some high-ranked politicians approached the BJP leadership in Delhi requesting the removal of its erstwhile crowd puller, Modi, as he is internally and more so internationally becoming a liability. So far to no avail.

After presenting this more recent example of the INC's failures (which of course had manifold precursors) the evergreen of reproaches against the INC must be mentioned: the internal Emergency from 1975 to 1977. This seems to be a blot on the so far clean vest of the INC concerning its democratic credentials. During this period, many Indians and India's friends abroad started doubting whether India would survive as a democratic country or whether it would finally join the ranks of other post-colonial societies as an authoritarian state. Even the renowned Professor for Political Science in California, Ram Mohan Roy, in 1975 stated that

the era of a free-wheeling press, impassioned parliamentary debates and brilliant oratory by the opposition is over. It would be unrealistic to expect a willy-nilly return to the pre-Emergency openness and freedom.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ram Mohan Roy quoted in: Bipan Chandra 2003, p. 278.

What had happened to pass such harsh words on India's democratic set-up? In the years 1974 to 1977 India went through fairly turbulent weather. From January 1974 to June 1975 India experienced a series of agitations, called *bandhs* and *gheraos* (strikes and shutdowns). Preceding that Indira Gandhi asserted her authority within the INC, which she had deliberately split in 1969, and as well as in the Indian political scene. In the 1971 elections, the INC swept the polls and wanted to regain its stand in the states where the party had faltered. The Bangladesh war and Indira Gandhi's election campaign to remove poverty with the telling slogan '*garibi hatao*' ('remove poverty') enhanced her position in the Indian polity so much so that she and the Congress leadership felt it must acquire all the levers of power in the states, which were, after all, the agencies for implementing much of the needed reforms and developmental programmes and policies. The states' legislative assembly election brought a huge victory to the INC. Indira Gandhi and the INC had now unified the political command in the centre and the states, giving Gandhi virtually complete control over the party, her cabinet and the chief ministers. This dominance was not even achieved by her father, Nehru, in his time.

But dark shadows were already lingering across the political skies of the INC. India was hit by an energy crisis which made oil prices rise and sparked inflation. This in turn sent the cost of fertilisers to soaring heights and exacerbated the industrial recession. This tendency could not be immediately reversed and was aggravated by a political crisis. General protests led by eminent leaders, still known from the independence struggle such as Jayaprakash Narayan ('JP Movement'), made the political climate suffocating for Indira Gandhi. She could not curb these challenges in political discourse and resorted to imprisoning most opposition leaders. Then, Indira Gandhi's immediate opponent in the general elections, Raj Narain, had filed an election petition against her, challenging the validity of her election on grounds of misappropriation of government funds and facilities during her election campaign. She could only retain the prime ministerial post by resorting to coercing the President to declare a national emergency instead of admitting that this was her own personal emergency (Kulke/Rothermund 1999: 304). As Kulke and Rothermund go on, the Emergency threw up a mixed bag of results:

The Emergency measures did lead to a certain improvement in the economic situation: no strikes were allowed, inflation was curbed and general discipline greatly improved. But all this was at the cost of the loss of civil liberties, which were, after all, the most cherished heritage of the Indian freedom movement (Kulke/Rothermund 1999: 304).

This view is supported by Chandra, who in the concluding chapter of his book on the Emergency, outlines in a rather balanced way the benefits and drawbacks regarding the Emergency. In the heated inner political situation Indira Gandhi was faced with the choice of total surrender or a fight to the end. She responded by resorting to authoritarian rule, thereby morally betraying her liberal-democratic up-



bringing and the ideals of the independence movement of which she was also part and parcel.

The very goals the INC fought for zealously during the pre-independence era were compromised by Indira Gandhi and the INC callously. They tampered with governmental structures and weakened all government and civil institutions. Parliament and Cabinet were converted into nodding entities. Civil constitutional liberties, such as the freedoms of expression and association and the right of *habeas corpus* (the right to appeal to the courts against arbitrary arrest) were suspended. Her own party, the INC, suffered probably the most. It was just expected to be a disciplined organisation without any inner party democracy, riddled by splits and popular contempt. The party far from being a cadre party was in an advanced state of decay, having become totally dysfunctional as power was concentrated in few hands.

This beleaguering and sullen situation ended when Indira Gandhi suddenly at the end of 1976 announced that elections were to be held in early 1977. In these elections the opposition had learnt its lesson from former elections concerning the electoral system and put up only one common candidate against the Congress candidate so as to avoid the splitting of votes in favour of the INC. Popular vote plummeted to an unprecedented 34.5 per cent and an even worse representation in the Lok Sabha of only 28.4 per cent of the seats.

The INC in the end did not destroy the delicate fabric of Indian democracy but severely jeopardised India's federal and liberal structures, bringing the country to the brink of ushering in an authoritarian state. As a by-product, one may say, the announcement of elections after the Emergency commenced Indian coalitional politics, bumpy as the initial stages might have been. The INC susceptibility towards a stronger Hindu slant in its policies also shows that there are other concepts of the Indian State prevailing in India. Not only the BJP and its right-wing parivar organisations favour a State which adheres to 'hindutva' as the guiding line. These ideas are also well-known in Germany where some politicians from the conservative side declare that Christianity is the guiding culture ('Leitkultur') of the German State. A change in concept in India would have a strong impact on the Indian State. Whether it would be as viable as the prevailing one is difficult to answer. So far the INC has always returned to secular values so as to not to destroy the fragile fabric of Indian society and at the same time maintaining the integrity of the Indian State.

## 6 Conclusion

The aforementioned deliberations in which the allegory of the *Trimurti* is thrust upon the INC shall help in identifying the party's contribution to the formation of the Indian State. It reveals that the INC as the champion of the fight for independence was not always complying with its own high ideals when it came to dealing with crisis and opposition in the political arena. One may ponder what might have happened if Mahatma had succeeded in persuading his party colleagues to dissolve the INC and transform it into a welfare society. The day before he was assassinated,

the Mahatma drew up a constitution for the INC that would enable the Congress to effectively complete the social revolution for which the independence of India had cleared the way and to guide the politics of the country instead of being reduced to the status of a mere party machine in the hands of the ruling group. He went on to tell the Congressmen, that

though split into two, India having attained political independence [...] the Congress in its present shape and form has outlived its use. India has still to attain social, moral and economic independence [...] [The Congress] must be kept out of unhealthy competition with political parties [...] and communal bodies.<sup>23</sup>

With the best of intentions he wished the All India Congress Committee (AICC) to resolve to disband the existing INC and ‘flower’ into a *Lok Sevak Sangh* (People’s Welfare Organisation). Gandhi already in the ‘creational period’ of the INC prophesied future weaknesses of the organisation which were subsequently to emerge. Nehru and the other leaders – as you would expect – were in no mood to pay attention to the Mahatma’s advice. As *Jha* wryly remarks, the Congress leadership put Gandhi’s proposal ‘quietly on the shelf’ (Jha 2004: 147) and changed its role from spearheading the national movement to that of a political party controlling all the levers of power. It is purely hypothetical to wonder about what might have happened to the Indian State without a strong INC at the centre. Looking at neighbouring Pakistan, India might have gone the same way had the then emerging parties not firmly established a stable democracy. Perhaps India would have drifted apart for want of strong leadership. A weak centre may not have been able to control disintegrating tendencies based on language or ethnicity. Little states may have tried to hold the centre captive by threatening it with secession, like the tail wagging the dog. However, wisdom gained through hindsight does not really help in shedding light on the issues; it only allows conjecturing developments.

The INC has certainly played a leading role in the creation of the Indian Union as we know it today. Through its political grasp over the entire country, it in many ways managed to preserve the liberal-democratic set-up of the nation, so much so that the INC itself was not able to destroy it in the darkest hour of the INC rule – the Emergency. The eventual advent of the coalitional period initially saw the Congress off from the centre stage of power in Delhi. The last election held in 2004 has demonstrated that the INC, in spite of its steep decline from the early decades of independent India, should not be written off as a political force, but that it proves to be astonishingly resilient to wage new struggles in a much changed political arena. The INC has understood the pattern of the new coalitional era. The leadership of the INC, much as it still might be thinking the INC to be the ‘natural party of governance’, diligently mask their wishful thinking and so far play their role well in the coalition of the day.

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<sup>23</sup> Gandhi’s Last Will and Testament in: Jha 2004, p. 149.

The INC has heeded the advice of their British founder father that ‘nations by themselves are made’ and it is yet to be seen how it will further develop India, whether the government will really opt for the poor and thus fulfil Mahatma Gandhi’s dream of attaining social, moral and economic independence.

Are ye Serfs or are ye Freeman,  
Ye that grovel in the shade?  
In your own hands rest the issues!  
By themselves are nations made!  
(Sir Allan Octavian Hume, “Awake”)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Second stanza from poem by Sir A.O. Hume, taken from “The Old Man’s Hope” (Calcutta, 1886), cited in: Mehrotra 2005, p. 75.

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